Cody Ciona: We need even-handed limits on protest

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Body

In recent years, protest has become commonplace. Most is peaceful and respectful of others. But some protest movements are shifting to increasingly hostile behaviour. David Suzuki was pilloried for predicting that eco-terrorists will blow up pipelines if they don't get what they want from government but is everyone certain that prediction is wrong? Threats of violence are creeping into mainstream rhetoric and harassment is being normalized, muddying the line between what is acceptable behaviour and what is not.

Last month, two business executives were harassed(https://dissidentvoice.org/2022/01/activists-in-canada-build-construction-site-on-pipeline-executives-front-lawns/) at their homes for their support of the Coastal GasLink project. TC Energy Inc. board chair Siim Vanaselja and Royal Bank of Canada executive Doug Guzman were blockaded inside their homes by demonstrators from World Beyond War for alleged violations of Indigenous rights. Demonstrators put up "construction sites" on the homes of the two execs and plastered neighbourhoods with photos of the men accusing them of "pushing the Coastal GasLink pipeline through Wet'suwet'en territory at gunpoint" - though many of the communities along the pipeline's route support the project and opposed previous attempts to halt construction.

In 2020, Coastal GasLink demonstrators from the climate extremist group Extinction Rebellion harassed(https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/john-horgan-home-activists-wet-suwet-en-supporters-1.5467114) B.C. Premier John Horgan and his wife at their home. They blockaded the premier's driveway to prevent him from getting to the legislature on budget day and were even so bold as to go right up to Horgan's front door and scare his wife, making her fear for her safety. Extinction Rebellion members banged on the door, claiming they would make a "citizen's arrest" and seize the premier. Horgan called the group's actions "well and truly beyond the line," noting that "if people think that it helps their cause to terrorize my spouse, then they're dead wrong."

Does this sort of thing sound familiar?

Maybe a photo of the current federal environment minister in a Greenpeace-labeled jumpsuit could jog your memory. In April 2002, Steven Guilbeault was involved with a Greenpeace team that climbed onto Alberta Premier Ralph Klein's family home and invaded their private property. Cargo vans arrived, ladders were laid up against the house, and the protesters tried installing solar panels on the house - all, needless to say, without permission or notice, except to media outlets.

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William Watson: Not in our downtown!(https://financialpost.com/opinion/william-watson-not-in-our-downtown)

That was before Guilbeault became a politician. Now that he is the federal environment boss, he is behaving himself. Yet his pre-politics actions helped create a playbook others now follow. In this time of heated debate, both pro-energy advocates and anti-oil demonstrators are trying to win the hearts and minds of the public. Social licence is talked about as a means to the end of getting any infrastructure project completed. But the fight for social licence has now extended into harassment of people, including non-politicians, at their private residences. The Freedom Convoy had and has every right to protest but the incessant honking and traffic jams caused real and significant disruptions to ordinary people on both sides of the debate have created real hardship.

An obvious difference between eco-activist disruption and trucker disruption has been the media reaction. Though stunts by Guilbeault and the like have usually been dismissed as droll and harmless, examples of truckers behaving badly have dominated the media. Yet, two short years ago, when protesters shut down(https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-51550821) major rail lines and harassed people from coast to coast in demonstrations over Coastal GasLink, barely a word about enforcement was mentioned. In a democratic country, the same standards should be applied to all protests, whether against natural resource projects or vaccine mandates. Civil society on all sides needs to take a stand and acknowledge that no matter how strongly people feel about an issue, harassment is not the way to win hearts and minds. It's just wrong.

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